

Lessons from Adaptive Programming

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Question

What are the lessons learned from adaptive and flexible programming? What are the factors that lead to success and how are results measured? Reference case studies preferably from the governance sector.

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1. Summary

The aim of adaptive programming (AP) is to produce adaptive, flexible, iterative, responsive, problem-driven, politically smart, locally led programmes which are effective and efficient and meet donor requirements for accountability. Where traditional programming uses standard formulae, ready-made solutions, and fixed indicators to measure success, AP focuses on “problem-driven” approaches with programmes employing an experimentation approach of “learning by doing” as the core ethos for the entire programme cycle, with vital emphasis on embedding learning into the whole system (Wild et al., 2017). Thus, three key aspects characterise AP and differentiate it from traditional project framework, namely, the nature of the interventions, leadership, and ways to imbed learning (ICF, 2019).

This is a rapid desk review of recent literature on AP including academic and grey sources. Section 2 covers the main challenges and barriers to successful implementation of AP including:

- Changing mindsets and attitudes
- Inherent tussle between structure and flexibility
- Organisational rules and technicalities especially in contract management and procurement which deter or disable adaptability
- Strict reporting requirements and inflexible donor attitudes
- Finding and employing appropriate programming, monitoring and evaluation tools
- Extra time, expense, and expertise of AP’s slower reflection and review approach

Key success factors covered in Section 3 are:

- Designing an adaptive programme cycle from inception with adaptive logframes and flexible budgeting
- Recruiting and empowering teams to be innovative, open and responsive
- Using local knowledge and being locally driven
- Creating communication, learning and feedback loops
- Utilising context and political analyses to inform policies
- Selecting the appropriate monitoring and evaluation tools

Selecting the appropriate monitoring and evaluation tools such as outcome harvesting or adapted versions of Value for Money to assist in measuring outcomes and embedding learning is key to successful AP, particularly in governance programmes, where results are usually long-term, non-linear and causality can be difficult to specifically trace back to the donor-funded intervention.

Section 4 details three case studies from the governance arena as this report was requested to assist in designing adaptive governance programmes. Thus, the State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) from Nigeria, Chakua Hatua from Tanzania, and Within and Without the State (WWS) from conflict regions are included to show how flexible indicators, donor communication and negotiation, empowering teams and adopting monitoring and evaluation tools assisted in successful AP outcomes in different locations and political contexts. The challenges faced and drawbacks of certain processes were fed into efficient feedback loops fostering cross-

communication, adaptation, and modification to ensure procedures and policies were changed accordingly.

Sources used are primarily from the previous 5 years, as per K4D norms, unless the work is seminal, such as the ODI Report (2016) *Doing Development Differently*, which encouraged over 60 countries to sign up for the AP methodology. This review found a substantive body of literature on AP methodology the relative recency of academic attention on AP in the development less evidence is available on case studies of AP in the development sector, as there are not many ongoing projects and even fewer have been completed and results assessed (ICF, 2019). There is also a lack of case studies on how dynamic, empowered, innovative teams successfully apply adaptive programming ideas, particularly providing behavioural insights about such teams (Cooke, 2017) as well as little attention to precipitating and sustaining behaviour change in institutions over the longer term (Power, 2017).

2. Types of Adaptive Programming and Challenges

What is Flexible and Adaptive Programming?

AP in the development sector emerged over the past decade or so, due to introspection about whether traditional programmes were achieving goals, or were ineffective or even harmful, combined with advancements in programme evaluation methods (Nixon, 2019). Adaptive programming (AP) or adaptive management (AM) are largely used interchangeably in the literature and will be so used in this report as “AP”. Technically, flexible programming is different from adaptive programming but most of the literature uses the term AP and refers to flexibility as a feature of AP. Only very recent studies have started to make an analytical distinction such as Laws et al., (2021, p.1) who, in their ODI Briefing Note, categorically state:

“Flexibility to shift resources or change priorities is something that all programmes need, to some degree, but not all programmes need to be adaptive. An adaptive approach is necessary for programmes operating on complex challenges and in uncertain contexts. In these situations, outcomes cannot be met by rolling out tried and tested interventions. Instead, teams need to deliberately test and experiment to find out what works”.

USAID (2020) uses a very broad definition for AP: “**an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context**”. AP employs and modifies conceptual models, in response to the findings of such models being deployed, so that the collected evidence informs better decision-making for maximum utility in a “learning by doing” process (Rogers and Macfarlan, 2020, p.3).

Unlike traditional programming where outcomes are fixed on a timeline, AP recognises that it is **impossible to foresee or comprehend a project's intricacies and uncertainties in advance** and it is not always possible for development practitioners to know from the beginning **how to achieve** a given objective in a project (ICF, 2019). This is especially true for initiatives in dynamic and complex environments, such as those **subject to the vagaries of the political, economic, or security environment**. The AP process places a strong emphasis on **"learning by doing,"** where assumptions are openly tested and learning is integrated throughout a programme (ICF, 2019).

AP recognizes that delivering change in complex environments is normally non-linear, often political, and frequently hard to predict, requiring shifting away from tightly conceived targets to allow the **focus to be on delivery outcomes, without over-specifying processes** (ICF, 2019).

Thus, AP gives room to test a method, discover what works, scale it up, and compound positive results whilst minimising or quitting methods or activities that are obviously not working (ICF, 2019). Effectiveness and efficiency are enhanced by this capacity for adaptation and adjustment, resulting in better value for money (ICF, 2019).

The adaptation process necessitates strategic flexibility to prevent making irreversible judgments, which is another important component because it allows for adjustments to be made even very late in the process, so that a previous choice may be changed unlike in traditional logical frameworks (ICF, 2019; Bandali et al., 2021). So, AP modifies conventional notions of the programme cycle blurring demarcations between design, implementation, and assessment, so the cycle is reframed to encompass the complexity of development issues and non-linear routes for change with assessment and learning at many more stages (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018, p.3).

Different Approaches to Adaptive Programming

Roger and Macfarlan (2020, p.8) summarise the different labels¹ applied to AP approaches in the development sector, which all draw upon AP commonalities: working with political analysis; adaptation to the local context, changing conditions, and new evidence; local ownership; and a problem-solving focus: Thinking and Working Politically (TWP), Problem-Driven Iterative Adaption (PDIA), Collaboration, Learning, and Adaption, and Doing Development Differently (DDD). As the scope of this report is to identify broad lessons, no distinction is made in the above types, which are all considered under the umbrella of AP.

The evidence base for an AP approach is not always robust enough to draw definitive conclusions. So, although there are many intriguing and compelling case studies in the literature, there is not yet a "strong enough" body of data to show that TWP has "significantly improved aid effectiveness", as gaps in the literature exist due to TWP's recent entry into the development discourse (Dasandi, et al., 2019, p.163).

Challenges in Adaptive Programming

There is widespread agreement in the literature that the following aspects pose the main challenges or are barriers to effective AP (Gray and Carl, 2022, p.10).

1) Mindsets, Attitudes and Conceptual Understanding

"The field of adaptive programming is messy" states Nixon (2019). Those leading the process frequently lack a conceptual understanding of the uncertain and changeable nature of the process (Gray and Carl, 2022, p.14). No matter how formidable a programme's resources and tools are, if leaders do not provide an AP conducive environment then results would be compromised (Gray and Carl, 2022, p.11). Changing mindsets and behavioural practices are more challenging than adopting new tools and processes (Desai et al., 2018, p.30).

¹ These are based on which organisation or academic institution coined the term. So, for example, DDD was coined by DFID, now FCDO.

ICF (2019) notes that **changing mindsets can be difficult**, especially for managers at the technical and operational levels, as this requires a willingness **to let context influence decisions and to let go of preconceived notions of what works**. It also requires **embracing admissions of failure** and overcoming the natural human tendency to only want to see success which can be very challenging if there is a **pervasive culture of assigning blame or a "payment by results" mechanism in place** (ICF, 2019). An atmosphere of “trust and psychological safety” allowing debate and reflection with colleagues and partners is important (Gray and Carl, 2022, p.12). Powers (2019) concludes that the practice of international development programmes (where political assistance is a component) on placing too much emphasis on changing institutional structures and procedures and too little on **culture and behaviour** has been one of its most serious flaws.

ODI’s report recognises how difficult it is for a minority of people within an organisation to **“swim against the tide”** if there is an absence of widespread buy-in for AP both within the organisation and externally (Wild et al., 2016, p.5). It is easier to go with the flow rather than innovate and commit the vast amounts of time, energy, and persistence required to tackle obstacles, which may include political and bureaucratic hurdles, that come with enacting change and displacing the status quo (Wild et al., 2016, p.6).

The team must share duties, be open and honest about budgets and accountability, prioritise problem-solving, and sincerely want to collaborate to learn and bring about change to use the adaptive programming approach (ICF, 2019).

2) Organisational Rules and Technicalities

These are particularly prevalent in HR, procurement, budgeting, and contract management departments which may encourage rigidity and deter or even disable any attempts to introduce flexibility and innovation (Wild et al., 2016, p.4).

Nixon (2019) concludes that AP is hampered when it is employed without a complementary approach for all other areas of the programme cycle, such as operations, where “rigid, traditional systems-based operations” are still running. Nixon (2019) also notes that till now, most of the attention has been directed towards changing the systems and procedures “at the beginning of the programming cycle”, including strategies, designs, and monitoring frameworks rather than at the **operational end where the basis of contractual payments, due diligence, budgeting, and financial management systems and reporting requirements, risk management and annual planning remains anchored in the traditional approach**.

“Inflexible or inadequate procurement systems also can create challenges for adaptive practices (Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020, p.14).

For example: although the quality of political economy analysis has historically been high, it was found in a Nigerian governance programme, PERL², that because the political economy analysis (PEA) had been designated a milestone payment, it became increasingly instrumentalized and, in some cases ended up more of a tick box exercise than something substantive and meaningful (Menocal and Aston, 2021).

² The Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL) is a five-year FCDO [UKAid](#) funded programme.

3) Strict Reporting Requirements

When teams are held accountable and performance is measured within a strict reporting structure, there **is a disincentive to try things differently** even if the existing practices are not producing optimal results (Wild et al., 2016, p.5). So Christian Aid Ireland found that **“reporting requirements were influencing the programme direction - not always in an effective or desirable way”** and **“that it hindered us from fully adapting to complex country contexts”** (Wild et al., 2016, p.30). Brinkerhoff et al., (2018, p.4) conclude that it is critical that donor procurement, contracting, and reporting processes are made flexible for learning and AP to succeed.

Requirements such as **Payment by Results (PbR) have been found to inhibit** a team’s ability to take chances, learn from mistakes, and make adjustments as needed, thus, PbR may not be appropriate for complex programmes working in difficult circumstances, such as PERL in Nigeria (Menocal and Aston, 2021). In the instance of PERL, the way PbR has been used has constrained the program's capacity to function in accordance with TWP principles. **The space for deeper, more meaningful, and more strategic learning has consistently been crowded out by reporting needs and requirements**, which involve a long list that includes numerous PEAs, semi-annual and annual reviews, as well as monthly, quarterly, biannual, and annual learning sessions and reports (Menocal and Aston, 2021).

It's feasible that the programme will occasionally be able to deliver greater outcomes with less regular (and onerous) reporting. An important question for donors and implementing partners to consider is what is required from a reporting perspective and why: what could a programme like PERL do less of to free up time and space for deeper and more strategic thinking and learning, while also ensuring that the donor feels at ease, especially in light of pressures for upward accountability? (Menocal and Aston, 2021).

Reframing learning so that it is not only understood in terms of reporting and accounting is also crucial. As PERL's experience demonstrates, it is crucial to dissociate learning from reporting on activities and outputs and (re)focus attention on outcomes to facilitate deeper learning for adaptive programming (Menocal and Aston, 2021). This change involves moving away from a narrow emphasis on what a programme does and whether it achieves its short-term goals and **toward a focus on how and why it does what it does**. Among other things, this change entails testing embedded assumptions and hypotheses about how change occurs, as well as overall strategy and direction (Menocal and Aston, 2021).

4) Inherent Tensions between Structure and Flexibility

Teams must navigate **“the inherent tension in trying to put structure around flexibility, strategy around iteration and some sense of knowing around largely unknown future paths”** (Nixon, 2019). In addition, flexible, adaptive, and responsive plans need to also meet standards of accountability expected by donors (Wild et al., 2016, p.9).

Nixon (2019) observes that AP requires a **“flexible, iterative and adaptive”** approach but in practice “iterative risked becoming scattergun or just plain unfinished; flexible was often short term and inconsistent; and adaptive frequently needed to be reined in with a bit of accountability.”

ICF (2019) cautions that “recognizing that adaptive programming can offer benefits in dynamic settings **does not mean an instant fix for every context**.” Menocal and Aston (2021) also warn that TWP is **not a “best practice” panacea** with pre-packaged solutions but is more of a “better

fit" perspective, providing a compass to aid in navigating politically complicated environments and reform possibilities³.

ICF (2019) further adds that it takes ingenuity and desire to figure out the best technique to detect improvements, which makes adaptive programming challenging. It is crucial to examine each intervention on its merit and within its own context because it won't always offer the best solutions. To determine the ideal framework and procedures for a specific intervention, the approach will require talent, understanding, and new forms of cooperation between funders and organisations (Desai et al., 2018).

5) Finding Appropriate Programming Tools

Although there is ample literature on AP approaches, Bandali et al. (2022) identified a **gap** in the availability of **practical programming tools** which implementers could tailor to their own programmes.

Addressing this gap, the Pathways of Change (POC) tool provides a technical framework based on evidence that is **broad enough** to allow teams from various geographies to **adapt their approaches to maximise flexibility while remaining in line with the overall programme objectives** (Bandali et al., 2022). A menu of milestones, with broad annual indicators to measure progress, can be chosen or adapted according to what suits its programme, by each team (Bandali et al., 2022).

By identifying the primary issues that need to be resolved and the best course of action to bring about change by taking the political and economic environment into account, the PoC tool supports an **adaptive programming approach** with the technology making it easier to **adjust pathways based on experimentation, monitoring, quick evidence collection and feedback** from various teams (Bandali et al., 2022). For example, an unexpected change in government priorities need not thwart a donor programme when a milestone can be changed or adapted accordingly using POC.

Also, staff capacity must be increased with training and information on new programming methodologies and tools. Gray and Carl, (2022, p. 15) found that AP methodologies such "strategy testing, theories of change, outcome harvesting", presented "steep learning curves" for staff and colleagues in partner organisations.

6) Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Challenges

M&E assessments in AP are becoming increasingly more sophisticated, both conceptually and technologically, so require a strong foundation of expertise, which can drive up costs (Barr, 2015) as they require staff capacity training and are time consuming (Gray and Carl, 2022, p.20).

Adaptive programmes that use the "fail fast" strategy to learn from mistakes can be undermined by an M&E focus on creating indicators for the next strategy to be tried, rather than reviewing and learning from the discarded one, which can be a source of inefficiency (Barr, 2015). Failed pathways which are not properly analysed and learned from can be problematic for donors in deciding whether and when to discontinue a programme of this nature (Barr, 2015).

³ In relation to the UKAid Partnership to Engage Reform and Learn (PERL) programme in Nigeria.

3. Elements of Successful Adaptive Programming

An Adaptive Programme Cycle

An emphasis on adaptability modifies conventional notions of the programme cycle by blurring demarcations between design, implementation, and assessment so the cycle is reframed to take into account the complexity of development issues and non-linear change routes (ICF, 2019). “Introducing flexibility at the planning stage means being practical, collaborative with partners, and grounded in programme realities” (Desai et al., 2018, p.12).

Successful AP case studies show that **flexibility is built into the project from inception** (ICF, 2019). Nixon (2019) recommends that all phases of the programme cycle must be designed to support meaningful adaptation by employing practices such as real-time data collection, stakeholder engagement, trust-building and strengthening partnerships, structured reflection, and policy dialogue. While all management processes and systems must be modified to enable AP including monitoring and evaluation, financial and human resource management, and delivery, all donor requirements must also be met (Wild et al., 2016, p.9).

Designing an Adaptive Logframe

Cooke (2017) suggests that “**a flexible delivery model and broad logframe**” be employed to allow room for including activities that were not foreseen in the project design phase or become actionable due to changes in the political agenda or environment.

Although logframes are crucial tools for accountability, they frequently lead to route dependence with donors often lacking the skills or expertise necessary to frame adaptable arrangements, despite their interest in doing so. Building donor capacity in this regard and avoiding lock-in despite shifting conditions may be achieved by negotiating **broad but well-defined indicators** and leaving flexibility for revisions (Desai et al., 2018, p.7).

Thus, AP can involve changing actions but not goals, modifying both causal pathways (actions) and goals, or changing actions/pathways and goals, and even the problem diagnosis itself (Rogers and Macfarlan, 2020, p.6). Parallel pilot programmes can also assist in optimising programme design when data is ambiguous and despite the extra time and resources spent, the resultant discussions can help foster buy-in and align stakeholder understandings thus mitigating the extra expense (Desai et al., 2018).

Flexibility in Budget Approach

The flexibility needed for AP must also be **supported by financial systems, budgeting procedures, and time horizons that are adaptable** to allow financial flows to areas with the greatest impact and the highest return on investment, as warranted by ongoing review, reflection, and learning (Cooke, 2017), “to reassign costs between budget lines or to entirely new activities” (Gray and Carl, 2022, p.26).

Cooke (2017) also suggests that “**fast reaction money**” be made accessible with authority at the location level to enable rapid response and this suggestion is also supported by Desai et al., (2018, p.6) who refer to “**rainy day**” funds to address needs-based adjustments and make funding flexible. Christian Aid Ireland recommends allocating an “**adaptation fund**” for each country team to enable flexible spending in response to “learning or context changes” (Gray and Carl, 2022, p.25).

Cooke (2017) recommends that risk be managed using a portfolio approach, so a “**small bets approach** is taken, where solutions are developed iteratively and first tested through 'small bets', which can be adapted and then scaled up (or abandoned if unsuccessful).”

Donor Communication and Accountability

An open line of communication with regular contact should be established and sustained to promote collaboration, a thorough grasp of the AP strategy and agreement on it as well as **alternative accountability methods**, so the extra flexibility and lack of predictability do not undermine the funder’s requirements for concrete results-based progress (Cooke, 2017, p.11). Flexible funding needs to be negotiated with donors with increased engagement such as **on-site visits and learning events** for donors to attend to keep them informed and aligned (Desai et al., 2018, p.7).

Gray and Carl (2022, p.26) outline that the strategy chosen in conjunction with Irish Aid (donor), in the programmes they studied, enabled an explanation (in a separate column) of why goals weren't achieved as well as information on whether the programme is moving forward, backward, or at a halt. Thus, it served as a platform for delivering a greater knowledge of what was discovered during implementation and what tactics were modified as a result so the outcomes framework adjusted its targets and indicators accordingly (Gray and Carl, 2022, p.26).

To create a management culture that supports adaptable working practices and an authorising environment, **institutional leadership and champions** are crucial. DFID/FCDO employees have been instrumental in improving outcomes within PERL and other adaptive programmes by fostering trust and facilitating collaborative learning (Menocal and Aston, 2021).

When DFID/FCDO engaged with a programme like PERL as a partnership rather than as a contractual relationship between the "client" and the "contractor(s)," and when they let go of central control and the propensity to be overly prescriptive about programmatic choices in favour of learning and experimentation, trust-building has worked best (Menocal and Aston, 2021).

Adaptive Mindsets & Empowering Teams

The aim should be **to change mindsets rather than just practices** so investment in **coaching and mentoring as well as fostering learning and reflection** among personnel at all levels is required. Such strategies, despite their high initial money and time investment, foster organisational culture and resilience for adaptive management (Desai et al., 2018, p.7).

The management team should address internal factors such as staff core competencies, and organisational culture to put AP at the heart of an organisation and embed an **adaptive, innovative, and agile mindset** (Wild et al., 2016, p.29; Cooke, 2017).

Providing authority and incentives for team members to experiment, learn and innovate is key to cultivating an AP-conducive culture (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018, p.5) so **leaders should re-orient their own mindset** towards empowering team members, **supporting risk-taking, innovation and experimentation** alongside achieving results (ICF, 2019).

Organisational change needs to be sustained. When moving from results-based management (RBM) to AP, organisations must commit to reviewing their strategy documents at all levels of the organisation and use monitoring tools to regularly reflect, assess and adapt to ensure that AP is

followed and sustained (Wild et al., 2016, p. 30). The institution must repeatedly exercise the new behavioural patterns in order to sustain organisational transformation (Power, 2017).

When teams are empowered, as in adaptive programmes, then the programme becomes more reliant on the individual efficacy and performance of team members so **facilitative leadership to foster adaptation** is required. Management must prioritise communication, **ongoing mentoring, and the development of the skills** needed to run AP so **recruitment** must also be based on the qualities needed to operate in an adaptive environment, such as the **ability to innovate and local knowledge**, rather than just technical proficiency and experience (Cooke, 2017).

Fostering a learning environment should also include **communication streams between country offices** to avoid information silos and bottlenecks (Desai et al., 2018, p.7).

ACTED (2019, p.12) found that a High-Level Steering Committee, in which each NGO partner is represented by its Country Director, meeting every quarter to discuss overall strategy and implementation status, combined with a second platform, a Technical Working Group meeting every month, where M&E, programmatic and operational matters are thoroughly deliberated, led to notable progress in implementation which also improved learning. Combined with active feedback mechanisms this has **effectively imbued AP not only in the programme logic but also in operational levels** (ACTED, 2019, p.12).

Behaviour Change

A contributor to the ODI Report observed that even in the most complex and politically sensitive cases, a lasting impact was more likely from precipitating **institutional behaviour changes rather than structural reforms**; targeting **individuals' behaviour** and practices were more effective than trying to enact institutional level changes; and **creating "small pockets of change"** could trigger a **"ripple effect"** throughout the institution (Wild et al., 2016, p.17; Power, 2017). Even though behavioural change is key to the longevity of impact beyond a programme life cycle, it is rarely cited as a specific objective of such programmes notes Power (2017) who recommends it should be given greater attention alongside flexible delivery.

ICF (2019) found that the successful AP case studies it documented had a common factor of **"increased collaboration between partners and agencies"**. Building **stakeholder networks** can also assist in data and intelligence gathering and garner support for collaborations and coalitions (Cooke, 2017).

Working in and with Government

Cooke (2017) stresses that AP must be **"locally led and politically smart"** with a strong focus on forging relationships with and **knowledge of authorisation mechanisms** in and across all levels of government, relevant authorities, and organisations. A recommendation drawn from a successful AP project study by Cooke (2019) is that team members dealing directly with political actors, **"the frontline" be fully authorised** to take decisions.

Political context and cooperation are important factors in the success of a programme both in the short term but also for the longevity of reforms or results. **Clear, consistent, and evidence-based communication** with the government increases participatory engagement and prevents the impression of a foreign agenda being foisted on what are often heavily burdened and under-resourced governments (Wild et al., 2016a. p.13). **Listening to local inputs** to diagnose the real problem is often more difficult than anticipated, and requires patience (Desai et al., 2018) as well

as acknowledging resistance amongst government beneficiaries to adopt change, which can require innovative solutions to overcome (Wild et al., 2016, p.15).

Local Knowledge, Learning and Data

Gray and Carl (2022, p.17) found “that there is a high correlation between partners that are learning and adapting and those that have **close relationships with communities and other primary stakeholders**”. Wild et al. (2016, pp. 10-11) underscore the need to engage with local stakeholders to leverage local knowledge and leadership so that programmes include a “**locally driven context analysis**” (Cooke, 2017). Including local actors within implementation teams supports AP (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018, p.5). Local stakeholders and actors including government, civil society, entrepreneurs, and the private sector are often overlooked but their involvement is important to sustain and propagate AP widely in the project environment (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018, p.7). “PDIA⁴ is locally driven and predicted to lead to better results compared to the importation of international best practices” (Harris & Lawson, 2022).

Analysing data, creating **data collaboratives** across networks, real-time feedback (as opposed to traditional summative data) and **monitoring systems** (such as SMS and open source), as well as **feedback loops**, can transform a team’s ability to adapt, innovate and respond based on the evidence that data provides (Wild et al., 2016, pp. 21-23).

Learning: AP places learning at the core of its system (ICF, 2019). **Feedback loops** are vital for adaptive programming because they inform decision-makers about the progress of activities, outputs, and outcomes, to enable monitoring, adapting, and correcting (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018, p.5). To determine if plans and actions are in sync, **single-loop learning** relies on tracking data within previously determined parameters, such as a yearly work plan, with specific targets and deadlines (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018, p.3). **Double-loop learning** goes even further by using the data to **delve into questions** reviewing the appropriateness of the objectives and targets themselves including tactics, underlying assumptions, unanticipated and emergent outcomes, the way power is distributed (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018, p.3) or even revisiting the problem diagnosis itself (Desai et al., 2018).

Political Economy Analysis (PEA) is another vital tool used to inform the above reflections about feedback loop learning and adaptation. PEA is most effective when it is “**problem-driven and participatory, engaging programmers and implementation teams, not just researchers**” so that the PEA process produces actionable data which is owned by the project and field staff (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018, p.3). PEA must be **rigorous and ongoing** with formalised context analysis mechanisms (Cooke, 2017).

Conflict and context analyses: A programme's capacity to adapt has shown to be mostly dependent on repeated conflict and context analysis, biannual result monitoring meetings, concentrated learning events, and subsequent scenario design. Conflict and context professionals frequently conduct conflict and context analyses (ACTED, 2019, p.10).

At the biannual reviews, data helps the formulation of alternate strategies and scenario-based planning techniques are shared to identify the conflict's causes, major players, and potential

⁴ Problem-Driven Iterative Adaption.

areas of change (ACTED, 2019, p.10). Having more than one predetermined plan of action and response ensures the organisation adjusts to the constantly changing circumstances typical of fragile situations (ACTED, 2019, p.10).

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

Gathering data and making choices based on the best available evidence requires formal tools and processes catering to AP which are dependent on **effective monitoring**, which in turn is **crucial for internal learning and adaptation**, as opposed to only serving as a mechanism for accountability to donors (Cooke, 2017).

Gray and Clarke (2022, pp.7-9) found a good body of evidence showing superior results resulted from AP's proactive **learning and reflection-based changes in programming strategy**, as well as its reactive ability to change course in response to unforeseen changes in the context and bolster flexible delivery.

AP decisions about scaling up, altering course, or ending ventures should be based on **intermediate outcome indicators and learning**, so systems for monitoring, evaluating, and learning (MEL), such as logframes, must be adaptable and have the potential to produce a wide range of outputs (Cooke, 2017). Cooke (2017, p.10) also recommends that a **search frame and "strategy testing" should be utilised**, instead of a fixed logframe, **with additional accountability measures** to show ongoing impact and outcomes to meet donor requirements. Gray and Carl (2022, p.20) found that strategy testing was a good way of providing of 'double loop learning', by diagnosing why strategies did or did not work alongside retesting any underlying assumptions.

The system of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) offers pertinent management data for adaptive programming. However, if the project's management data is only utilised for Accountability (A) and not for Learning (L), M&E is of very little value for adaptive programming (ACTED, 2019, p.6).

For example, the Burundi case studied by ACTED (2019, pp. 6-7) revealed the complete log frame had 24 compulsory indicators with 33 additional indicators related to outputs and outcomes, "**resulting in a massive M&E system** with 57 indicators, with the main aim of accountability only". The group understood that using such an M&E approach had a very high chance of never achieving any learning, leading to a review of the M&E process to evolve to MEAL (ACTED, 2019, pp. 6-7). An outside consultant was hired to do a baseline (early 2017), midline (early 2019), and end-line (late 2021) study, despite it not being a technical requirement. These studies were carried out to achieve a thorough understanding of the complexities of the programme and provide opportunities for an external objective review of the design (ACTED, 2019, pp. 6-7).

The midline evaluation received the most attention in terms of time and resources since **midline reflections significantly aid in programme adaptation**, whereas an end-line assessment is too late to assist in decision-making so can only be beneficial in the current programme for accountability purposes (ACTED, 2019, p. 7).

Desai et al (2018) advocate developing **locally owned MEL** through a dedicated budget for **investment in staff training**, encouraging **bottom-up decision making and data collection** to foster locally responsive solutions.

Approaches to Success Measurement

Monitoring and evaluating programmes under AP can be more difficult due to the need for an M&E design that is focused on both learning and accountability from the outset of the programme cycle (Pasanen & Barnett, 2019). Additionally, as programmes have become more adaptive, **the way success is measured by donors has come into conflict or created tensions with AP's "learning by doing" ethos** and associated costs of trial and error, especially in governance interventions where results are usually non-linear, longer-term, and better served by qualitative rather than quantitative measures (Laws and Valters, 2021, p.24). VfM is a widely used measurement by DFID (now FCDO) and has been the subject of analysis in the literature with the way it has been modified providing possible lessons for other measurement methods.

Value for Money (VfM)

The VfM focus on tight cost management and holding implementers responsible for cost-effective delivery may be appropriate for simpler projects, but it can cause tension in complex situations, "where teams need to test and learn to determine which combination of inputs and outputs produces the best results for the investment" (Laws and Valters, 2021, p.7). When programmes are required to justify their progress in narrow monetary terms and traditional returns on investment this discourages honestly reporting "their reflections about processes of trial, error and learning so, at a minimum, this suggests that good VfM analysis should be integrated into a wider monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) approach – something that did not reflect common practice in many DFID funded programmes" (Laws and Valters, 2021, p.13).

Laws and Valters (2021) suggest modifications to make VfM more adaptive. An illustrative example is reproduced from Laws and Valters, 2021, p.17 below:

"Cost-effectiveness in Traditional VfM: What is the intervention's ultimate impact on poverty reduction, relative to the inputs that we (or our agents) invest in it?"

"Cost-effectiveness in Adaptive VfM: What is the intervention's ultimate impact on poverty reduction, relative to the inputs that we or our agents invest in it? Is the overall investment worthwhile and/or funded at the correct scale, based on the performance of the programme against the other Es⁵ and its relevance to broader changes that are being pursued at a portfolio level?"

Adaptive VfM was demonstrated in SAVI which ran operations in ten states of Nigeria, using these diverse political settings to carry out **parallel testing** of various methods and a comparison of outcomes. SAVI used VfM efficiency statistics to measure external influences and determine if the level of performance in a state was caused by factors under the control of the state team (Laws and Valters, 2021, p.19). The team examined programme success overall and **found patterns over time by comparing outcome results with the strategies used in each state.** This apparently helped develop a picture of the relative efficacy of each state team and question or verify the overall **theory of change** (Laws and Valters, 2021, p.20).

⁵ Refers to 4E framework where Es stand for Economy; Efficiency; Effectiveness; Equity (Laws and Valters, 2017, p.17).

4. Case Studies on AP in the Governance Sector

Nigeria's SAVI Programme

A **large-scale, long-term** effort called SAVI provides good data and evidence as a case study, as UK governance programmes in Nigeria have shaped interventions and operated in politically sensitive and flexible ways for more than 15 years (Piron et al., 2021, p.9).

They depended on **frontline delivery teams who built trusting connections** with State Governments and non-state players and possessed in-depth contextual knowledge based on regular Political Economy Analysis (PEA) and occasionally decentralised decision-making (Piron et al., 2021, p.9). The primary factor in why programmes were able to make the variety of contributions to outcomes noted by the research is this **capacity to "think and work politically" (TWP), a type of AP** (Piron et al., 2021, p.9).

Recommendations from Studies on SAVI

1. **Long-Term Commitment:** Derbyshire & Donovan (2016) emphasise that AP results manifest in a slowly evolving non-linear manner so programmes must be prepared to invest over a longer time frame and avoid the "quick win" mentality which can be detrimental to AP techniques, capacities, and relationships. Long-term investments, spanning 10 to 20 years, should include assistance for both state and non-state actors advise Piron et al., (2021, p.78).

2. **"AP Relevant" Expertise:** Programmes need managerial ability, strategic level mandate, and frontline staff expertise to pursue possibilities utilising political analysis intelligence (Piron et al., 2021, p.78). However, rather than focusing on technical proficiency and experience, AP cannot succeed without personnel with qualities that enhance teamwork, facilitation, collaborative problem-solving and humility to accept failure and adjust accordingly (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016).

3. **Meaningful Political Economy Analysis:** Piron et al. (2021) recommend that PEA be developed further by exploring "causal processes" They caution that even when staff members have a thorough awareness of the political backdrop that determines how they function, PEAs in some programmes have lost analytical depth turning into a tick box exercise (Piron et al. 2021).

4. **Build in Flexibility:** Derbyshire & Donovan (2016) stress the need for factoring in flexibility from the outset of the programme. Piron et al. (2021) go further by recommending that governance programmes incorporate the flexibility **to switch between fundamental questions of governance and service delivery**. Piron et al. (2021) observe that programmes on governance have a propensity to ignore how state procedures and institutions truly affect the lives of individuals at the ground level, in favour of concentrating on "upstream" concerns. So, inserting "downstream" components, for example, would ensure a feedback loop between the way services are delivered and the processes used to make policies (Piron et al., 2021, p.78). This idea of flexibility throughout the programme cycle is reinforced by Derbyshire & Donovan's (2016) recommendation to **"integrate technical leadership and operations management"**.

5. **Donor Relations:** Derbyshire and Donovan (2016) suggest programmes **"aim for transparency and accountability in financial management – but not necessarily complete predictability"**. For everyone involved, adaptive programming is uncertain, unpredictable, and

seems financially riskier so it is crucial that the donor, supplier, and programme personnel establish clear communication, tight cooperation, and prompt decision-making channels (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016). To fulfil donor needs for predictable financial flows and value for money/cost-effectiveness, financial forecasting and management systems need to enable adaptive planning, allowing financial resources to be moved about and deployed where appropriate, whilst committing to ongoing re-forecasting and regular budget reviews to maintain accountability and transparency for donor confidence (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016).

Table 1: How Flexible Indicators Worked in SAVI Logframe

AP Success Factor	Observations
<p>Bedrock Indicators</p> <p>Don't change over programme life cycle</p> <p>Keep goalposts in place</p> <p>Are particularly useful at Intermediate and Outcome Levels</p>	<p>Avoid the pitfall of having too many process indicators in the results framework.</p> <p>Selecting meaningful and durable bedrock indicators is not easy.</p>
<p>Flexible Indicators</p> <p>Activities (routes) and Outcomes are changeable</p> <p>Particularly useful at the Outcome Level</p>	<p>Indicators that become irrelevant are dropped or modified.</p> <p>This means logframes will go through many versions over programme life cycle.</p>
<p>Basket of Indicators</p> <p>Complementary basket of indicators</p>	<p>Allows different paths or routes that change/impact can take.</p> <p>As no single indicator can capture the full desired change.</p>
<p>Outcome Harvesting</p> <p>M&E Level</p> <p>Open-ended "concrete change" indicators</p> <p>Retrospectively captures the story of real developmental change</p> <p><i>Identifies contributory</i> factors including SAVI's role</p>	<p>The programme commits to delivering a target <i>number</i> of improvements not pre-specifying what they will be.</p> <p>A range of issues of partners' choice are covered (partners in different states in Nigeria).</p> <p>Caveat: SAVI was conscious of avoiding flawed post-hoc logic of claiming success.</p>

Source: Author's own using data from Barr (2015).

Tanzania's Chukua Hatua Programme

DFID, Oxfam GB, and others implemented the governance programme Chukua Hatua (CH) in Tanzania from 2010-2015 aiming to bolster Tanzania's civil society to improve government responsiveness to citizens (Smith and Kishekya, 2013 as cited in Desai et al., 2018, p.13).

Adaptive Approach: Parallel Strategies

Implementers of Chukua Hatua (CH) **tested five concurrent strategies** to promote active citizenship in Tanzania over the first nine months of the programme. Representatives from

implementing partners, Oxfam, and donors utilised **four predetermined criteria** to choose whether initiatives should be scaled up or down after testing (Lonsdale, 2012, as cited in Desai et al., 2018, p.17).

However, abandoning activities exposed a drawback of the AP experimentation approach: teams had spent a lot of energy and money on the pilots, potentially resulting in waste and deflating employee enthusiasm (Desai et al., 2018, p.17). Three approaches were used by staff to address this drawback: (a) hosting **learning events including staff in M&E**, which promoted inclusivity and helped create shared understandings of the strategies chosen and why; (b) utilising **outcome-harvesting** to enable partners to identify progress markers, and (c) **fostering cooperation with DFID (donor)** by inviting its staff to participate in learning events (Desai et al., 2018, p.17).

Success Measurement: Outcome Mapping

In CH, outcome mapping has been demonstrated to be a useful assessment method. Staff members implemented a biennial outcome mapping study to look at programme changes and trends (Green, 2012 as cited in Desai et al., 2018, p.21). The team concluded that this strategy worked well for **documenting the programme's effects on partners** in a methodical way and for creating a **shared understanding** between programme personnel and partners (Desai et al., 2018, p.21).

Instead of the fixed indicators used in traditional logframes, the partners replaced them with **progress markers**. These markers were modified during implementation **to account for unexpected findings and prepare for unanticipated outcomes** (Smutylo, 2005 as cited in Desai et al., 2018, p.21).

In turn, data gathering by partners provided opportunities for reflective learning and allowed for a study of the factors affecting programme outcomes. However, **the following obstacles** made outcome mapping less effective (list (a) to c) from Desai et al., 2018, p.21):

- a) the requirement for management to make a **concerted effort to prepare employees** and partners for this new strategy (e.g., programme staff had to translate materials, train workers on how to use specialist data software, and set up feedback and monitoring procedures for fieldwork)
- b) although outcome mapping encouraged shared M&E responsibilities, it **increased the workload** for staff members who were rotated into M&E
- c) the outcome mapping procedure generated significant, sometimes insurmountable volumes of data, causing difficulties in properly handling, using, and exchanging data, exposing the need to build the **extra capacity required by outcome mapping techniques**.

Process Tracing & Outcome Harvesting

The programme team chose to **combine process tracing with outcome harvesting for its midterm review** of CH. These two tools were chosen because they were thought to work well together and because the programme was already using outcome mapping, a monitoring strategy that is closely related to outcome harvesting, to track the development of changes in behaviour, relationships, policies, activities, and actions (Smith and Kishekya, 2013 as cited in Pasanen and Barnett, 2019, p.26).

The evaluation team examined the relevance of CH's contribution to the outcomes, measuring three outcomes wherein they found proof that each outcome had indeed manifested (fully in two cases and partly in one). They also discovered that, while CH had a significant role in each outcome—which would not have happened without CH—there were other contributing factors that affected the results (Smith and Kishekya, 2013 as cited in Pasanen and Barnett, 2019, p.26). The evaluation also turned up two unfavourable results, which is something that many evaluations overlook but is in keeping with the learning spirit of AP (Smith and Kishekya, 2013 as cited in Pasanen and Barnett, 2019, p.26).

Peer-to-peer Learning

Facilitated peer-to-peer exchanges, creating networks of employees and partners to promote learning and knowledge sharing online and in person (Desai et al., 2018, p.26). The peer-to-peer exchanges in Kenya and Tanzania brought together personnel, and civil society from both nations with Kenya embracing outcome mapping as a more useful MEAL method revealing both desired and unforeseen changes in community life that resulted from the programme activities (Desai et al., 2018, p.26).

Tanzania's I4ID Programme

Kelsall et al. (2021, p11) studied the FCDO and Irish Aid's Institutions 4 Inclusive Development (I4ID) programme which aimed "to promote inclusive development and strengthen democratic institutions in Tanzania". Despite early closure Kelsall et al. (2022, p.10) use the study to provide recommendations for those wishing to design adaptive, issue based and politically smart governance programmes in Tanzania as below (adapted from Kelsall et al., 2022, p.8, Figure 1):

Step 1: Assemble team of locally based staff ideally with strong local networks and a well-connected leader

Step 2: Identify a problem using a light version of PEA and systems mapping to formulate a "loose" theory of change or set of hypotheses

Step 3: Design the intervention using human centred design and providing modes for inclusive decision and policy making

Step 4: Test an approach and gather feedback then adapt as necessary; enlist stakeholder support and keep donors aligned; review progress regularly using PEA and more in-depth analysis periodically.

Step 5: Use funds in a strategic and flexible manner

Within and Without the State (WWS)

From 2011 to 2016, WWS, a DFID Programme in Afghanistan, the Occupied Palestinian Territories/Israel, South Sudan, the DRC, and Yemen tested several strategies for fostering responsible governance in fragile and conflict-affected environments, through civil society (Desai et al., 2018, p.15). One of WWS's main roles was gathering information and distributing lessons about what makes programming in these contexts effective (Desai et al., 2018, p.15).

Table 2: Adaptive Elements in WWS

Adaptive Element	Focus and Benefits	Drawbacks
<p>Adaptive Logframe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extensive & global - Light reporting requirements - Wide flexible targets 	<p>Focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) - Empowering "change agents" - Enhancing interactions between the state and civil society <p>Benefits</p> <p>The adaptability of the logframe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enables the global programme coordinator to serve as an extra resource for national offices - facilitates lesson-sharing - encourages adaptive thinking - allows making modifications 	<p>Context-driven implementation can produce silos that hinder reflective learning and result in "path dependency."</p> <p>Wide, flexible objectives can cause untrained personnel to become confused; being adaptable in such situations might be challenging if staff members have "business as usual," input-output thinking.</p> <p>Full donor support for such reforms is uncommon. Even more uncommon is active participation through on-site visits, which can help donors become more understanding of the situation and receptive to changes.</p>
<p>Selection of Complementary Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comprehensive and transparent partner selection process. - It required a strong new national director for WWS South Sudan to expedite this process and emphasise its significance against difficulties in locating suitable partners. Oxfam chose partners that were most closely aligned with its goals after reducing the list through intensive conversations with CSOs and donors (Anthony, 2014 as cited in Desai et al., 2018, p.23). 	<p>Focus</p> <p>Choosing partners can be time- and resource-consuming, especially if outside factors like conflict interrupt the process frequently.</p> <p>Benefits</p> <p>Encouraging CSOs that were not chosen to also engage in governance changes.</p> <p>Increases the level of civil society participation across the nation.</p>	<p>Drawbacks</p> <p>WWS South Sudan office - lengthy procedure involved meticulously mapping out possible CSO partners which caused confusion among country employees and thus implementation was delayed for more than a year.</p> <p>Partners generally did not have the resources or flexibility in their programmes to meet Oxfam's diversified mission, which would force staff to settle for second or third-best options.</p> <p>Momentum from an inclusive partnership selection process faded due to a lack of means for formal partner collaboration such as in-person meetings.</p>

Adaptive Element	Focus and Benefits	Drawbacks
<p>Real-Time Evaluations (RTEs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quick "sense checks" - To find course corrections - Or identify corrective measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Realistic assessments of the problems in South Sudan were made possible by a renewed emphasis on learning, the implementation of community scorecards and other instruments to increase community involvement and partner responsibility. - Despite obstacles, there is potential to combine RTEs with "action research" for bottom-up evaluations run by partners and communities. 	<p>In Afghanistan RTEs were not well-understood by the consultants contracted to carry them out, and staff members, particularly M&E professionals, lacked sufficient expertise in this area.</p> <p>As a result, trained workers had to spend more time working with the company developing capacity rather than using the RTEs to address programme needs.</p>
<p>Learning Events & Informal Learning</p>	<p>Benefits</p>	<p>Drawbacks</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Between country offices and beyond the programme, learning is crucial to WWS. - Lesson exchange is facilitated at the micro level and through learning activities by the Programme Management Unit (PMU). - For instance, the DRC office frequently hosts webinars or in-person sessions for its personnel in South Sudan to exchange lessons learned. 	<p>Encouraging discussion and reflection, face-to-face learning, particularly through learning events, is significantly more successful.</p> <p>For instance, country offices got together in January 2015 to create a chronology of the WWS deployment, which was useful for gathering lessons gained from various country offices and filling institutional memory gaps.</p>	<p>Issues of language limitations and low interest showed that webinars are not the best option in these situations.</p> <p>In conflict areas, face-to-face meetings are difficult or very costly to arrange as was the case when the violence in South Sudan hindered peer-to-peer learning sessions.</p> <p>Learning strategies that put too much emphasis on recording lessons in reports rather than promoting staff discussion, reflection, and observation present a significant obstacle.</p>

Source: Author's own using data from Desai et al. (2018, pp.19-23)

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Key websites

- Overseas Development Institute (ODI): <https://www.odi.org>
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